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Gays often find Springs a chilly city

Many in survey report being targeted by bias

By LISA MARTÍNEZ
THE GAZETTE

Gay people don't generally feel threatened in Colorado Springs, but they don't necessarily feel welcomed, either.

"Colorado Springs is not the place where everybody hates gay people," said Ryan Acker, director of the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center. "But it's a little less accepted here than Denver."

Acker bases that conclusion on results of a survey just released by the center. The survey, the first of its kind for the center, attracted almost 300 responses to questions about living as a gay person in Colorado Springs.

MORE ONLINE

For more information on the survey released by the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, call 471-4429 or visit www.ppglcc.org.

The unscientific survey was handed out at this summer's PrideFest celebration in Acacia Park. Some responses came from online submissions, mail-in forms and patrons at gay-friendly clubs and bars. Thirteen percent of the respondents identified themselves as straight, but most of the rest said they were gay, lesbian or bisexual.

While 39 percent of respondents said they feel safe being "out" in Colorado Springs, 60 percent said they don't feel the city welcomes and accepts gays and lesbians.

Close to half — 41 percent — said they feel they have been the target of discrimination.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said they were Democrats, 9 percent Republicans and 30 percent politically unaffiliated.

The survey results in Colorado Springs are similar to what gays feel across the state and nation, said Denise de Percin, director of the Colorado Anti-Violence Program in Denver.

One difference between Colorado Springs and Denver is that Colorado Springs has no policy prohibiting discrimination against city government employees based on sexual orientation, she said. Denver does.

That leaves some gays in this city more susceptible to discrimination than in places like Denver, she said.

De Percin suspects the percentage of people who experienced discrimination could be higher than what was reported in the survey. Few people report less serious cases of discrimination and violence, she said.

"They see a lot of small incidents," de Percin said. "They know it's wrong, but not that big of a deal. So they don't do anything about it."

That viewpoint doesn't hold true for Stacy Sessom, a bartender at Club Q on North Acade-

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my Boulevard.

Sessom has been "out" for five years and hasn't experienced any problems with discrimination, he said when asked to comment on the survey results.

"I hear about discrimination, but it hasn't happened to me," said Sessom, 48. "Maybe I'm just one of the fortunate ones. I don't know."

Still, Sessom said he wouldn't walk around Colorado Springs holding a man's hand.

He could do that in Denver, where he spent two years before moving to this city, he said.

Madison Morgan, an employee at St. Lukes Eye Care and Laser Center, works with the public almost all of the time.

No one has ever refused him the right to live somewhere or the right to work in this city, said Morgan, adding he tells potential employers his sexual orientation during job interviews.

"I'm not a flaunter, but if somebody's going to ask me, I'm going to tell them," Morgan said.

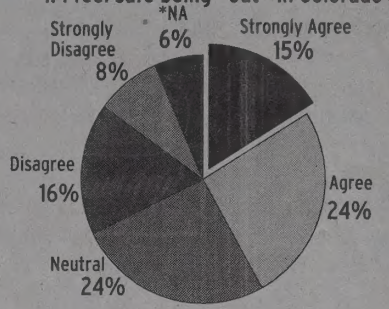
In the next year, Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center representatives plan to work on providing greater protection for the civil liberties of gays, Acker said.

No specifics of those plans are in place yet.

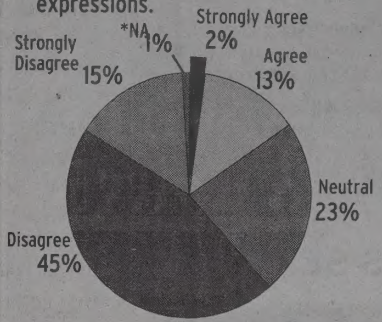
Safe, but not necessarily welcomed

Almost 300 people responded to a survey about gay life in Colorado Springs. Here are responses to three questions:

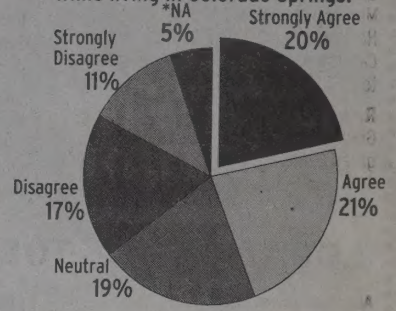
1. I feel safe being "out" in Colorado Springs.



2. I feel that Colorado Springs is welcoming and accepting of gay people, and diverse gender expressions.



3. I have been discriminated against because of my sexual orientation while living in Colorado Springs.



*No answer

SOURCE: Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center

THE GAZETTE

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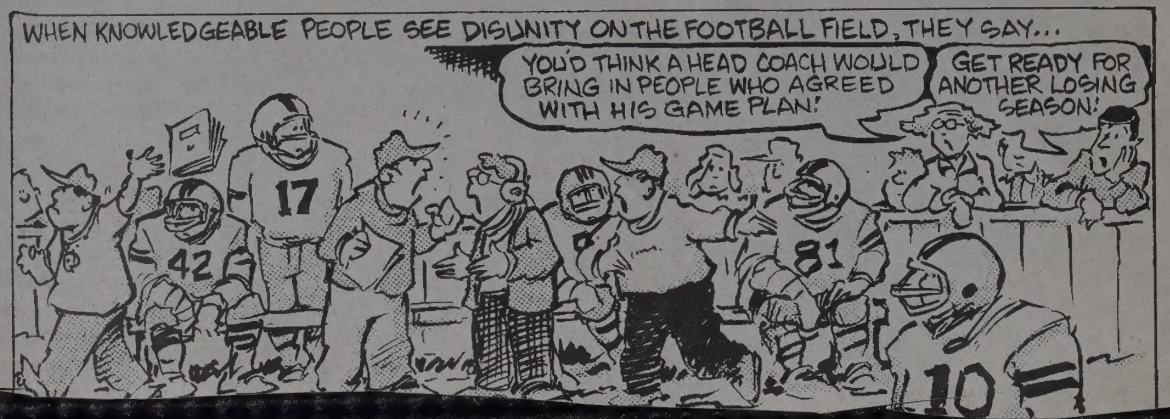
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